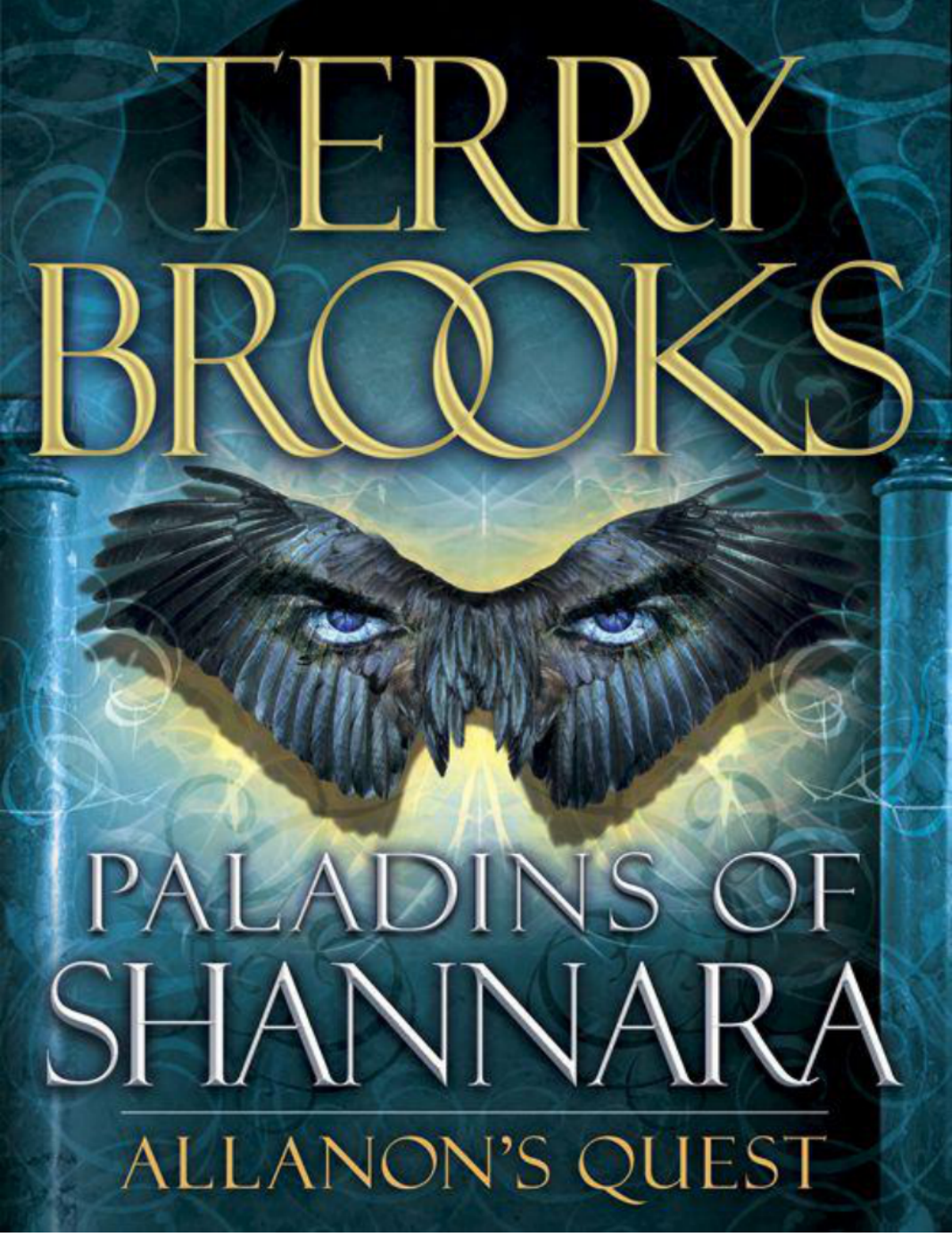
TERRY
BROOKS
PALADINS OF
SHANNARA
ALLANON'S QUEST

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Allanon is on a desperate quest to find the last heir of Shannara before the Skull Bearers can wipe them all out.

- Allanon's Quest
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Allanon's Quest

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The storm clouds scudded across the night sky in roiling clumps that blotted out the half-moon and stars and enveloped the land beneath in heavy shadow. The woods surrounding the village of Archer Trace, fifty miles north and east of the city of Arborlon, stirred uneasily. The trees swayed, and their leaves shivered with a metallic rustling as wind tore at the branches in sharp gusts and rain pattered heavily against the leaves. A drop in the temperature had already announced the storm's arrival, the air damp, chilly, and raw. Intricate patterns of lightning flashed, and bursts of thunder rumbled from across the eastern edge of the Sarandanon.

Allanon pulled his black robes tighter and his hood closer as he entered the Elven village, passing the first of the outlying buildings and making his way along the empty pathways. Candlelight burned in the windows of a few cottages and huts, flickering behind glass panes or through open shutters, and this small light was sufficient to guide him on his way. But most of the buildings were entirely dark. The residents had either gone to bed in anticipation of an early rising or down to the taverns that provided the main source of entertainment for the village.

Had anyone been looking through windows or shutters, or had he been careless enough not to disguise his coming, he might have been observed. But Allanon was not the careless sort, and he had used his Druid skills to change his appearance sufficiently that he seemed little more than another of the night's shadows. To anyone looking, he simply wasn't there. It was a Druid trick–one he had perfected during his early years, when he was just learning his craft. Bremen, who had taught it to him, was already gone by then, so he had mastered it on his own, expanding on his existing skills.

But while Archer Trace was the sort of miserable place where inhabitants and visitors alike made it a point to watch one another closely, there was little vigilance on this night. The foul weather did not invite the monitoring of those abroad, and the pleasures of the taverns provided a more attractive lure. So Allanon passed into the village relatively unseen, traveling along its single roadway to a cluster of ragged buildings that were illuminated by torches wedged down in iron brackets beneath their weather shields, fighting bravely to stay lit against the onslaught of wind and rain.

Slowing, he looked for the sign that would identify his destination and quickly found it: THE DRUNKEN FOOL. Big, bold letters–no doubt a reference to its patrons. But if it could provide him with the information he needed, what did the nature of the business or its

patrons matter to him? He had come all the way from Arborlon on this slim hope of success because time and opportunity were growing short. And rumor alone was enough to send him on what others might have dismissed as a fool's errand. Lives were being snuffed out, and all that mattered might soon be gone–something that would prove disastrous to the Four Lands. If even one of those he sought could be saved, he had to do whatever it took to make that happen. There was more at stake here than his discomfort and risk.

He cast aside the magic that let him remain unseen as he pushed his way through the tavern's heavy door and into the smoky interior, then looked about. The room was crowded–more so than he would have expected, given the size and condition of the village. Most of the tavern's denizens were Elves; no surprise there–this was their homeland. But it appeared as if everyone who lived in Archer Trace or might even have been passing through had gathered. A few heads turned to look at him, but most turned quickly away. A man seven feet tall and possessed of rough features and a dark scowl did not draw many extended looks. He ignored the few looks he received and waited for the barkeep to acknowledge him. When the man gave him a nod of recognition, the Druid turned his attention to a small table in the back of the room and the two men who occupied it. A moment later, both men rose, having suddenly decided that it was time to leave although neither could have said why.

He gave it a moment, then crossed to the table the men had vacated and sat down.

After a few minutes, the barkeep wandered over.

"Long trip?" He was a large, heavyset man with big features and a dour look. For an Elf, he looked downright sullen. "I know everyone in the village," he added. "You've come from somewhere else."

Allanon nodded. "A cold tankard of ale would ease my weariness."

The barkeep nodded and wandered off, and Allanon looked around at the room's patrons, his gaze moving from face to face, making sure that nothing seemed out of place and no one appeared to be a threat. By the time he had finished, the barkeep had returned.

"Anything else?" He set the tankard of ale down and waited. "Something to eat, maybe?"

The Druid shook his head. "Do you know where I can find a man called Derrivanian?"

"Might. What's your business?"

"My business is my own."

"Maybe so, but I don't like sending trouble to other people's doorsteps. Trouble finds them quick enough without my help."

"I intend no trouble." Allanon brushed the rain from his shoulders

and sat back. “He is an old friend. I knew him when he served as record keeper for the Elessedils.”

“Oh, you know of that? So maybe you are a friend. But where’s the proof? What’s to say you aren’t here to collect a bill or cause some other sort of mischief?”

Allanon gave him a look. “Derrivanian is an old man with an old wife and an old dog, and he hasn’t got much of anything to give and no history of ever having done anyone harm. Why don’t you just tell me where he lives?”

The barkeep shook his head. “I need something more than your word before I tell you anything. I don’t much like the look of you–all in black, dark-faced, and grim. You’re a big man used to getting his way. Well, I’m a big man, too, and I’m not afraid of you.”

Allanon went very still. “It isn’t me you should fear, barkeep.” He locked eyes with the man. “Ask yourself this. Are you sure enough of yourself that you would risk a meeting with some who might not ask any questions but simply tear the information from you? Would you risk a meeting with those they call Skull Bearers?”

The barkeep paled. “Do not speak that name in here!”

“What name should I speak, then? I gave you Derrivanian. Should I give you another? The Warlock Lord’s name, perhaps? Or is there another you would prefer me to speak?”

The barkeep backed away. “I want you out of here! Take your business elsewhere and seek your answers from another.”

Allanon shook his head. “I have no time for asking others. I have chosen to ask you, and I will have my answers now. Look at me. Where will I find Eldra Derrivanian?”

The barkeep tried to back away, but suddenly his strength failed, and he found himself rooted in place. His face tightened with his efforts to free himself, and it was clear he saw something new in the Druid’s eyes that made him realize what he was up against.

“Answer me,” Allanon ordered.

“Take the road west out of the village.” The barkeep was speaking in a different voice, one dredged up from the dark places you hide when you are very afraid. “Go about five hundred yards. Look for a fence and a wooden gate inset with the carved image of a rooster. He can be found there.”

Allanon nodded. “My thanks. Now forget you ever saw me. Forget this conversation. Forget everything but your purpose in coming to my table with my tankard of ale.” He paused. “What was it you wanted to ask me again?”

The barkeep’s eyes, which had lost focus, suddenly seemed clear again. “Something to eat, maybe?”

When the barkeep had left the table, Allanon took a few minutes

to finish the tankard of ale, relishing the cold liquid flowing down his throat and the fire it brought to his belly. He stopped examining the patrons and the room and delved deep into his own thoughts, musing on the Druid abilities he had developed since leaving Bremen to his fate at the Hadeshorn all those years ago. Sometimes, it seemed like a dream to him. He could still see the old man walking out onto the glistening black rock of the Valley of Shale to the edge of the lake's waters and into the arms of the Shade of Galaphile, then being carried beyond into the mists. He could still remember standing alone afterward and wondering how he could manage what he had been charged with doing.

He was only fifteen when Bremen had left him. Only a boy. But he had been strong, both physically and mentally, and he had only grown stronger with time. And he had used that strength in ways that now made his name a household legend.

He had restored Paranor to the world of men, using the Black Elfstone entrusted to him by Bremen, and made the Druid's Keep his permanent residence. He had brought a fresh contingent of Elven Hunters–supplied at first by Jerle Shannara, then by those Elven Kings who had succeeded him–to act as protectors of the Druid's Keep and the Sword of Shannara, which had been set within a block of Tre-Stone and placed in a vault, there to await the day when Bremen had promised it would be needed again.

Then he had slept the Druid Sleep, deep and dark with magic that let time and aging pass him by.

But now the day that Bremen had promised had arrived–the day for which Allanon had been preparing himself all his life. A life that, because of his extensive use of the Druid Sleep, spanned almost five hundred years.

So fifteen years of age was a very long time ago, and that boy he had been was very far removed from who he had become.

He lifted his eyes from the tankard and looked out across those years to the many, many people he had left behind. He was in the prime of his life, while all those he had known as a boy and a young man were gone. It was a strange feeling to realize that so much had passed him by. It was a hard way to live your life, but he was the last Druid–the only Druid–and he wondered where he would find another to succeed him. He had looked, but no one seemed right for the weight of what he would have to ask of them. Who would willingly accept that burden? Worse, only someone who fully understood what it meant to shoulder such a load, and what responsibilities came with it, would be the right choice.

But that was another problem for another time, and this night was meant for other work.

He pushed back from the table and rose. The tavern seemed busier than ever, the bar crowded with laughing, shouting, jostling people. All the tables were occupied. He was barely on his feet before a pair of young men hurried over to claim his space, pausing only long enough to make certain he did not object. He nodded to them and walked away–ignoring the barkeep, who ignored him in turn–then moved back through the door and out into the night.

Wrapped in his cloak, he trudged up the muddy roadway, head bent but ears and eyes alert for sound and movement. The rain was a slow, steady downpour that had already soaked the ground and was now being channeled into low places to pool and settle. He kept to the drier parts of the sodden path as best he could, moving westward toward his destination, thinking about what he hoped to accomplish. So much depended on what Eldra Derrivanian remembered or what he had written down, or even what he might be able to divine. It had come to this: a sort of crazy guessing game as to who might still be out there that the winged servants of the Warlock Lord hadn't already found. Someone who hadn't already been revealed by traitors and sycophants eager to preserve the lives they were assured of losing. Someone who hadn't already been turned or killed.

Someone who might still have courage enough to do what was needed to save the Races.

But this was Eldra Derrivanian, and he might not care about saving anyone.

* * *

Two weeks earlier, Allanon had thought his search a lost cause. He had known of the Warlock Lord's imminent return for months. All the signs were there for anyone who could read them. Winged fliers had been spotted in the North–Skull Bearers patrolling the night skies over the Knife Edge Mountains, bathing in the waters of the River Lethe to armor their skin by day. Bodies of travelers had been discovered in the surrounding regions, ripped to shreds and partially devoured. People and animals alike had gone missing, never to be seen again. Fire bloomed in the once-dead volcanoes that riddled the Charnal Mountains, and deep rumblings shook the earth at regular intervals.

The prophecy that Bremen had passed on to him all those years ago was coming to pass. Brona, the once-Druid who had fallen victim to his own pursuit of the dark magic and evolved as a consequence into the Warlock Lord, had not been destroyed as most believed. The Elven King Jerle Shannara had not successfully wielded the sword forged especially for this purpose, and though the Warlock Lord had been defeated and driven from his mortal body and the Four Lands, still he was only diminished, not dead. One day, Bremen told the boy, the Dark Lord would return. To that end, the Sword of Shannara must be kept safe and made ready for an heir to the Elven house of Shannara. When the time came, whether during Allanon's lifetime or the lifetimes of his Druid successors, a Shannara heir must take up the Sword and stand against the Warlock Lord once again.

It was easy enough simply to acknowledge this truth and set it aside for another day, which is what Allanon had done. He had made certain the Sword of Shannara was kept safe at Paranor and gone on with his life. Years had passed, with no indications of the expected return. Other matters had occupied his thoughts and his time. Eventually, hundreds of years later, the prospect of the Warlock Lord's return was all but forgotten.

Even so, he recognized it when it happened, and he understood what was needed to keep the people of the Four Lands safe. But he had acted too slowly. He had failed to anticipate the nature of the approach the Warlock Lord would employ to make certain the Sword was not used against him a second time. The Sword itself was anathema to both the Dark Lord and the Skull Bearers; they could barely stand to be in its presence, let alone touch it for even an instant. So lacking the means to take it for himself, Brona chose instead to eliminate all those who might one day use it against him. He decided to wipe out Jerle Shannara's line.

Systematically, he killed all those who were scions of the Elven house. Since Jerle Shannara's direct descendants had all died of natural causes within three generations of his own death, the Warlock Lord needed only to search out those distant relations who carried even a trace of his Elven blood. Allanon did not realize at first what was happening. And by the time he did and began his own search, he found himself arriving too late to save any of the ones he sought. By then he was in steady communication with the young Elven King Eventine Elessedil, and the two of them were working together to glean any references or scraps of information about Shannara descendants from the Elven genealogy records and histories that might help in their search.

It was Eventine's last message that had brought Allanon to Arborlon two weeks earlier and set him on his current hunt.

"You've had no luck finding an heir?" the young King had asked him after they had settled down in one of the private reception rooms. Eventine had only recently ascended to the Elven throne following the death of his father. Already, Allanon believed the Elf's potential was enormous. His charisma, his strength of character, his concern for his people, and his ability to act quickly and judge fairly suggested he was a king in more than just name.

"No luck at all," he answered. "Every single source has yielded only the dead. We are running out of time."

"And out of names. I have exhausted my sources here. Are the Druid Histories and your personal records of no further help?"

Allanon was an historian of some note and a meticulous keeper of records. He had made a concerted effort to write down the names of Shannara heirs over the years, recording deaths, births, and marriages. But even he had not been able to follow every thread in the line, and so the possibility existed that a man or woman possessing Shannara blood could still be found.

"I am out of ideas. I have nowhere else to look."

"I thought as much. But there is one other possibility we have overlooked."

Allanon had been surprised. He had thought their search had ended with the deaths of the entire Waylandring family in Emberen a week earlier. He had thought there was no one left. "Who have we missed?"

"Not a descendant of Jerle Shannara, but a man who might know of one that we do not. His name is Eldra Derrivanian. He was the keeper of the genealogical records for the members of the royal families and the Elven High Council for many years. He was there even before my father. His knowledge was phenomenal, even for a keeper of records. He could trace almost any branch of their lineage

from memory. He kept his own set of records in addition to ours, and he took those records with him when he was dismissed from service just before my father died."

"Dismissed? I sense a problem."

"You are not mistaken. Derrivanian left under very unfortunate circumstances. His son was killed while serving in the Elven Home Guard. The killer was never found, and the reason for his death remained a mystery. The circumstances surrounding the event were suspicious, and Derrivanian could not let the matter drop. He demanded that my father do more. But my father was old and dying by that time, and failed in his efforts. Derrivanian was so distraught he began to ignore his work. In some cases, he deliberately sabotaged it–in small ways at first, and later in much more extensive ones. When my father found out what he was doing, he dismissed him. Derrivanian appealed to the High Council for help but was rebuffed. In the end, he left Arborlon in disgrace."

"So he has no reason to want to help us."

"You will have to discover that for yourself."

"You know where he is now?"

"He was seen in the village of Archer Trace only a week ago, discovered by a member of my Elven Guard during our searches for the descendants of Jerle Shannara. Finding him was a complete accident. He is living there with his wife. Both are quite elderly. If he still hates the Elessedils as much as he did in the time of my father and remains resentful of his dismissal, it may be difficult to persuade him to help. But he might have his private records with him, or some memory of a member of the Shannara family that could lead us to an heir."

"And you believe that if he understands the magnitude of the danger to the Elven people–to his people–he might be persuaded to put aside his anger?"

Eventine had shrugged. "You are the best one to find this out, Allanon. You are, in all likelihood, the only one who can persuade him."

So here he was, off on another fool's errand, searching out an Elf who had no love for the Elessedils and a lasting bitterness toward his own people for their failure to support him in his complaints against the Elven throne. But it was the best chance left to him. Better yet, he might, for once, be one step ahead of his enemy. Derrivanian was not a member of the Shannara family, and so the Warlock Lord and his minions had no reason to seek him out. This time, Allanon believed, he might find the object of his search alive. This time, he might have a chance to discover information that was unknown to the Warlock Lord.

And if so, maybe all was not yet lost.

* * *

He was almost completely beyond the limits of Archer Trace when he passed the fence with the rooster carved into its gate. He paused to study the house it warded. Lights burned in the interior–enough to indicate that someone inside was still awake. He watched the windows for movement but saw none. He cast a net of seeking magic to spy out hidden dangers and found none of those, either.

Satisfied, he opened the gate, went up the path to the heavy wooden door, and knocked.

Immediately, he heard movement within. “Who’s there?” a man called out.

“A stranger to you,” Allanon answered. “But I bring news from Arborlon that you will want to hear.”

There was a long pause. “There is nothing I wish to hear from Arborlon and its Elves. Go away.”

Allanon sighed, his dark face implacable. “The barkeep at The Drunken Fool seemed to think it was important enough to send me this way. Why not hear me out?”

Another pause. Then the locks released, the door swung open, and weak candlelight spilled out into the rain.

The man who stood there was bent with more than just the weight of years and the infirmities of age. Reflected in his eyes were anger and frustration, which spoke of injustices suffered and endured. Bitterness was there, and an expectation of further damage, waiting just around the corner and still out of sight but there nevertheless. There was weariness and a deep sense of resignation.

There was something else, too, but it took a moment for Allanon to sort it out from the rest of the burden this man bore.

There was fear.

“What do you want?” Eldra Derrivanian snapped at him. Then he paused. “Wait. I know you. You’re the Druid Allanon.”

“We’ve never met.”

“No, but you were at the King’s court and before the High Council often enough. I know you, even if you paid no attention to me. Now get out of here.”

Allanon moved his foot swiftly to block the door. “First, you will hear me out. Once you’ve done that, I’ll go my way. But not before.”

Derrivanian stared at him balefully, then turned his back. “Do what you like. It means nothing to me.”

Allanon entered the room and closed the door behind him. He glanced around quickly. The room was small, sparsely furnished, and unkempt, and smelled unpleasant. Dishes were piled in a washbasin,

and clothes were strewn about. He felt right away that something was wrong, but other than the obvious, he couldn't decide what.

"Where is Collice?" he asked.

Derrivanian's wife. The old man hesitated, then nodded toward a door at the back of the room. "Asleep. Sick. She tires easily these days. She goes to bed early. What is it that you want with me?"

Allanon moved over to the tiny kitchen table and sat, waiting. After a moment, Derrivanian sat down across from him. "I require your help," the Druid said, leaning forward, elbows propped on the table, chin resting atop his folded hands, eyes fixed on the old man. "And I hope you will agree to give it after you've heard what I have to say."

"My help to do what?"

"To think back in time and try to remember something for me. To use your exceptional mind to call up something that perhaps no one else can. And if that fails, to peruse your private records to jolt that memory."

The old man rubbed at his face. He was unshaven, and his cheeks and forehead were deeply lined. His ears drooped with age, and his slanted brows were shaggy and gray. His salt-and-pepper hair was wild and stiff as he ran his fingers through it. "Whom do you seek?"

"Anyone who is an heir to the Elven house of Shannara."

The other was silent for a long moment. "The Warlock Lord has returned, hasn't he? The rumors are true."

Allanon nodded. "He has returned, and he has brought his Skull Bearers with him. He is hunting down and killing all of the Shannara kin so that the Sword cannot be used against him again."

"How many are dead so far? Wait. Don't tell me. All of them, right? All that you can find, in any case. If you need my help, it must be as a last resort. How did you even find me?"

"An Elven Hunter searching for news of an heir saw you."

Derrivanian shook his head. "I was hidden here for three years. No one knew. I found some small measure of peace. And now this." He sighed. "I don't have any love for the Elessedils. I don't even have much love for the Elves, no matter if they're my own people. None of them did anything for me when I needed their help. They let my son's death go unpunished. They let his murderer go free. They tossed it all aside like it didn't much matter."

Allanon held his gaze. "This involves more than just Arborlon and the Elessedils. The survival of an entire world is at stake. I need you to put your anger aside."

"Do you? Too bad. Why should I bother? Why should I care about the world or anything else?"

"Because you don't want it on your conscience if everything goes

wrong, and you could have done something to prevent it. Come, Derrivanian. You're been a good and faithful steward for too many years to throw it all aside when it could mean so much to so many if you could help. Stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves."

The old man rose and walked away, stopping to look out a window–perhaps contemplating what he saw, perhaps only gathering his thoughts. He was silent for a long time. Allanon let him be. Too many words of persuasion would have the wrong impact on this man. It would be better to let him come to the right decision on his own.

"You seem a strong man, Allanon," he said finally. "Is that so? Are you as strong as they say?"

Allanon kept quiet, waiting.

"Because I'm not a strong man. I am a weakling and a coward. I've lost a son, and I don't–" He stopped suddenly, shaking his head. "You don't know what you will do until you are faced with a situation that tests you. You think you know, but you don't."

Still, the Druid waited. But he couldn't help wondering as he did so what it was the man was trying to say.

Eldra Derrivanian turned back to him. "There is one last possibility, one last man who may have been overlooked by the Dark Lord. He is a distant relative, born to the son of a son of a cousin once removed from the direct line. His bloodline is true, though. He would have enough of the Shannara in him to serve your purpose. His name is Weir. Shall I tell you where he can be found?"

Allanon nodded slowly. "Tell me everything."

* * *

Allanon departed the cottage shortly afterward, pulling his hood over his head and his cloak tightly about his shoulders, hunching down against the onslaught of rain. He had what he needed to find the man Derrivanian had named, including the location of the place where he could be found. Weir lived on a farm well outside any town or village, north of Emberen, close to the southwestern edge of the Kierlak Desert in country that was just barely Elven and in no way friendly. It was a day's journey in good weather and more in bad. It was better traveled by horse than afoot, and so the Druid went back into Emberen to find a room in which to spend the night before seeking a mount for the morrow's journey.

He was still troubled by his visit to Eldra Derrivanian. Something about it didn't feel right. The man himself, the words he spoke, his actions–none of it. He realized suddenly that there had been a mattress in one corner of the front room, shoved off in a corner. Why was Derrivanian sleeping there when his wife slept in the back room? Or was the bedding for someone else? His wife's sickness could account for the state of the cottage, but there was a furtiveness to him that was troubling.

On the other hand, this was a man whose life had been a shambles for many years, a man who had exiled himself from his people and his previous life and gone into the outback of Elven civilization. He had lost his son and his position and the respect of his King. He had become an object of scorn and pity and outright suspicion. Everything he had built his life around was gone. Perhaps it wasn't so strange that there seemed to be no substance to him.

Allanon spent the night at a rooming house set apart from the taverns, and in the morning he procured a horse and set out. He rode north at a steady pace, through the forests, following a series of trails and paths toward the Streleheim. At midday, he passed onto the plains. The terrain changed abruptly, trees giving way to empty space and shade to heat. The rains had moved on, but the earth was left sodden and muddy, and the sun turned the standing pools to steam.

He let his horse meander across the uneven ground so that it could find decent footing, his thoughts straying to the task ahead. He was already thinking about what he would say to this man Weir to persuade him to take up the Sword in defense of his people. Over the past few weeks, he had composed dozens of arguments and hundreds of reasons for all those he had thought he would encounter in his long, fruitless search. In the end, he had needed none of them because there had been no one alive to persuade. If the same was true this

time as well, he wasn't certain where he would go next. Back to Derrivanian, perhaps. He wasn't entirely satisfied that he had been given the truth.

But the hard fact remained that he still hadn't found the man or woman he needed, and the time left to do so was growing short. If Weir refused him, what would he do then? There was nothing to say the man wouldn't say no. Most would decline any sort of involvement in this business, no matter its importance and urgency. The danger was enormous, the risks terrifying. Jerle Shannara had been unable to kill the Warlock Lord, and he had been a king and a warrior. How could anyone expect an ordinary man to do better?

And, yet, that was what would be required. That was what would need to happen to end what had begun all those centuries ago.

He should have planned better, he chided himself. He should have known this time would come sooner rather than later, and he should have found the ones he needed and prepared them. He should have kept better records and spent more time sizing up the heirs who remained. He should have protected them all from what had happened.

He should have done so much more.

The day wore on, and the sun moved westward across the sky toward the horizon. As he neared his destination–a place called Rabbit Ridge–a man herding sheep passed into view. Allanon rode over and hailed him.

"Well met," he told the man.

The man just stared at him, saying nothing. Allanon could read what was on his mind. He wanted nothing to do with this huge, black-cloaked rider with the grim countenance and imposing presence.

"I'm looking for a man named Weir. He lives on Rabbit Ridge. Do you know of him?"

The herder spit. He pointed left, made a warding sign, then turned away abruptly and hurried on, clucking to his sheep to move them along faster. Allanon watched him go, but he did not wonder at the man's reaction. In his place, he would have done the same.

He rode on, watching the shadows cast by his horse and himself lengthen in front of him, noting the twilight's approach. Not much farther, he thought. Then he would have his chance to persuade a man with no desire to place himself in harm's way that this was exactly what he must do. He wondered if he would find in this man the strength of character and courage and decency to invoke the magic of the Sword. He wondered how the man would react when he heard what the Druid had to say. He had rehearsed the moment so often without ever having come this close to experiencing it. He had prepared himself repeatedly, and all for nothing.

Would it be for nothing again?

He found Rabbit Ridge, a thickly wooded and rough piece of ground, and rode his horse up its slopes. Poor land for farming, he saw, mostly scrub and sparse stands of timber and rocky ground. Sheep might do well here. Was that what the man farmed? He hadn't asked Derrivanian. It hadn't seemed important then and probably wasn't now. Still … He was going to ask a farmer to come with him to stand against a monster. It was insane.

He reached the apex of the ridge and urged his horse along its length toward a broad stretch of grasslands that ran like a ragged carpet to the door of a house and barn. There were sheep in a fenced pasture, milling about, moving first in one direction, then in another, looking stupid and lost. He felt a sudden kinship. His eyes shifted to the buildings. There was smoke coming from a chimney attached to the house but no sign of occupants. The barn was big and empty-looking; the hinged doors facing him stood open to the darkness within.

The last of the daylight was fading as he walked his mount to the porch that fronted the house and climbed down.

"Hello the house!" he called out. "Anyone?"

No answer. He didn't care one bit for what that suggested. Draping the reins of his mount over the porch railing, he climbed the steps to the door and knocked.

Still no answer.

"Hello! Anyone?" he repeated.

He walked the length of the porch to peer through the windows. The house looked inhabited. It was well kept, with furniture intact, dishes set on a table, and ashes banked against a stack of wood burning in the hearth. It looked as if the owner had just momentarily stepped away.

Not that there was much of anywhere to step away to.

Except the barn.

Allanon left the horse where it was and walked toward the open doors, keeping a careful eye out for trouble. He had survived enough attempted ambushes and traps to be mindful, and he was not about to fall victim now. He glanced around the farmyard, but other than the sheep in the pasture, there didn't seem to be anyone or anything about. Even so, he fully expected to find Weir in the barn since he wasn't in the house and didn't appear to be anywhere else close at hand.

But when he got there, the building was empty. He walked far enough into the shadows for his eyes to adjust. The stalls were empty, the floor bare, and the interior of the barn silent. He glanced up at the hayloft, but there didn't seem to be a ladder at hand that would allow

him to climb up.

He decided to make a more complete search of the level he was on. He walked into every stall, examined every corner, poked through the hay mound, and looked inside the tack room. There was a toolshed attached to the barn, but the door that led into it was outside. So he exited the barn and walked around to where he could have a look. The shed was filled with hand tools, a workbench, and scrap metal. Nothing there, either.

He closed the door to the toolroom and walked back around to the front of the barn, glancing up momentarily to where the hayloft opened out on the yard.

"Up here!" a voice called suddenly from behind.

There was a man standing on the porch, waving. Allanon stared. Where had he been before? "Are you Weir?"

"I am," the other said. "Come closer, where we can talk."

Allanon started back toward the house. He was no more than ten feet from the man when he noticed the nervous shifting of his horse in the dusty yard, the stamping of hooves, and the sudden shaking of his head.

A warning …

Too late. The man on the porch moved first, one arm whipping up sharply, a throwing knife streaking toward the Druid and burying itself in his chest. Allanon tried to react but was a fraction of a second too slow. He staggered back, stricken.

Immediately, a whole raft of armed men emerged, pouring out of the house, out of the barn, seemingly out of the ground, howling and brandishing weapons of every stripe. Allanon threw up a protective shield of magic, throwing back as many of his attackers as he could. He dropped to one knee to make himself a smaller target, then yanked out the knife as he tried to gather his strength. To remain where he was would mean his death. Once they sensed the extent of his weakness, they would be on him.

A handful broke through, but he was back on his feet to meet them and flung them away as if they were straw men. He moved quickly, rushing his attackers. They stumbled back from him, none of them eager to stand his ground against this angry giant. But one in their midst, a big man like himself, was shoved forward by the rest, perhaps to champion their failed efforts, perhaps out of desperation only. All dark fury and cold intent, Allanon was reaching for him when he caught sight of archers rushing forward and drawing back their bowstrings. The Druid barely had time to act. Snatching the tunic of the man in front of him, the Druid whipped him about and used him as a shield. A cluster of arrows struck the man, who jerked and went limp. Allanon threw him down in disgust and brought up his

protective magic once again.

Those of his attackers still able to do so came at him, some throwing knives, some firing arrows, some using slings, all trying to bring him down. But he was warded by his magic and not so easily reached. His attackers were thrown back again. Even those remaining at what seemed a safe distance found that the Druid magic could reach them easily, and they were tossed aside as well. Bones snapped, and lives were extinguished. Twice more the attackers came at him, and twice more they failed to reach him.

Finally, their numbers reduced by more than half, they turned and fled into the fields and the surrounding countryside, the desire to fight gone out of them.

Allanon clung to one of the uprights supporting the porch roof, watching them flee. Derrivanian's help had been worth nothing. He would have to go back and start over. Once he healed, of course. Once he felt strong enough to do so.

Dizziness washed through him, and a glance down at his robes reinforced his suspicion that he was losing blood rapidly. He pressed gently against the knife wound, trying to staunch the bleeding, using a thin skein of healing magic to help close the ragged opening.

He was engaged in that effort when the Skull Bearer appeared.

He didn't see it at first, but he heard the slow beating of its wings. Then it was swinging around from behind the farmhouse, making no effort to disguise its coming, settling in slow, insolent fashion onto the corpse-strewn yard in front of the porch. Black-scaled from head to foot, and long-limbed in a way that made its crooked arms and legs seem all out of proportion, it was warded by the cape of its huge wings. Eyes, bright and expectant, glittered from beneath a heavy brow that shadowed its roughhewn face.

"Druid," it hissed at him.

"You arranged all this," Allanon replied, making it a statement of fact.

"I did."

"Why go to such trouble?"

The other's breathing was deep and rough, as if its lungs could not manage to draw in enough air. "Because the Master wishes it. Because it pleases me. Do you know what you have done this day? You have put an end to your last chance at preventing our return."

Allanon stared, uncertain what the creature was saying.

"The man lying at your feet, the one you used to shield yourself? *He* is Weir, and he is the last of the Shannara. The last hope you had. We would have killed him ourselves, but you saved us the trouble."

Allanon felt despair fill him–what had he been manipulated into doing?–but his expression never changed. "Is this your hope, creature?

I think a man who sold his services to the Warlock Lord was never the Shannara we needed, and killing him is of no importance." But doubt still nagged at him. What if the man had been an innocent, trapped, like himself, by the Warlock Lord's forces? What if his last hope truly *was* gone?

The great wings drew close about the dark body. "Think what you wish. It matters not the least to me. But your end draws near, Allanon. Like the man lying at your feet, you are the last of your kind. Time will not save you."

"Do you intend to finish what your assassins started?" Allanon asked the Skull Bearer. "Because your power lessens in daylight, does it not?"

The other hissed at him. "Why bother to kill you? I have come to bear witness to your misery. You hide it well, but your despair is revealed nevertheless. You hoped this man would save your people, but now that cannot happen. Worse still is the way it was accomplished. You were betrayed, Druid. The one who sent you gave you over to me. Think on that. Then do with him what you will."

The Skull Bearer spread its wings and began to lift away, circling upward into the sky.

"My brothers and I will return for you soon, Allanon!" it called back to him. "Watch for us!"

Then the creature was gone, and the Druid was alone.

* * *

Allanon chose not to spend the night in the farmhouse even though his knife wound was serious enough that it would be wiser to stay where he was. But with dead men all around him and the prospect of the Skull Bearer changing its mind and making a return trip–perhaps with others for company–the Druid decided it was better to put a little distance between himself and the day's events. Using his magic to strengthen himself as best he could and setting course for friendlier ground, he mounted his horse and rode south into the forests of the Elven Westland and found refuge with friends in a small outpost miles from anything.

There he allowed his wounds to be treated by the wife's practiced hands and took to bed, where he slept undisturbed for thirty hours. Then he rose to wash himself and eat and drink for the first time in two days, and went back to bed.

It took four days of rest, traditional healing skills, and Druid magic before he was fit enough to travel again. At the end of that time, as dawn broke and the day began, he reclaimed his horse, bid his friends farewell, and set out for Archer Trace.

His plans for Derrivanian were still unformed. He understood his options, and he knew that, when the time came, he would have to choose among them. But his thoughts were dark and tinged with anger, and he did not want to get too close to them until he understood for certain what had happened. It was too easy to conclude that he already understood everything. But he had believed that once before, when going in search of Weir, and it had almost been the death of him. This time he would be more circumspect and less resolute about what he thought he knew.

He rode through the day at a steady pace, but he made frequent stops to rest and took time to eat and drink and replenish the magic that healed his wounds. He breathed in the spring air, feeling warmth in its breezes, the first hint of summer's approach. It was a time of rebirth in the world, the yearly beginnings of new life and fresh possibility. He wanted to feel just a little of that, wanted to hold it in his heart and draw from its strength.

Twilight approached as he came to the edge of Archer Trace and turned down the roadway that would lead to the cottage of Eldra Derrivanian. He no longer bothered to consider what he was going to do, even though it was not yet decided. He would know when he faced the man. His instincts and his intellect would show him the way. He was a Druid, after all, and a Druid always knew.

He reined in his horse at the gate bearing the rooster carving, left

it tied to the fence, and walked to the door of the cottage. Derrivanian opened the door before Allanon reached it.

"You're alive," the old man said, and in the tone of his voice, Allanon detected an unexpected note of relief.

They stood on the porch staring at each other. "Why did you give me up to them like that?" Allanon asked finally.

Derrivanian shook his head. "I wasn't offered a choice. Come in. I will tell you everything."

They entered Derrivanian's home, which looked exactly the same as it had when the Druid had visited the last time–counters and dusty furniture cluttered with pieces of clothing and unwashed dishes, mattress and bedding shoved into one corner, and the bedroom door closed.

The old man beckoned the Druid to the kitchen table, asked if his guest would like a glass of ale and, on receiving a negative answer, turned his back to pour one for himself. He studied the glass a moment, then returned to the table. Once again, the two men sat across from each other in the mix of fading daylight and approaching night.

"I did not want you to be killed," Derrivanian said.

"That's very reassuring." Allanon kept his voice steady even though he was seething. "But if you didn't want me killed, why did you put me in that situation? You aren't pretending you didn't know what they would do, are you?"

The old man shook his head. "No, I knew exactly what they intended. The Skull Bearer told me when it came to find me several weeks ago. I don't know how it found me, but it did. It explained very carefully what I was to do and why I should do it. It told me that if I failed, Collice would die. If I did as I was told, she would be allowed to live. That was the choice I was given."

He rubbed at his eyes, and his knuckles came away wet. "It was plain enough. I was to let myself be seen by one of Eventine Elessedil's Elven Hunters. They come through here regularly, guarding against the Warlock Lord and his minions. Once I was identified, it was virtually assured that word would get back to the King. Because of my knowledge of Elven genealogy and your need to find a Shannara heir, you would be sent to speak with me. For something as important as this, no one else would do. When you came, I was to tell you of Weir. The Skull Bearers knew of him already, having tracked him down on their own. But he was an evil man and in no way likely to take up the Sword and become a champion for the Elves. He had already announced to the Skull Bearers that he wished to be an ally of the Dark Lord. What he didn't realize was that it had already been decided he would be used in another way."

"As a lure to attract me." Allanon saw it now.

"Yes. But not for the reason you think. Not to kill you. The Warlock Lord had something more insidious in mind. Since Weir was the last of the Shannara, what Brona wanted was for his death to come at your hands. He wanted revenge against the Druids for the terrible harm Bremen had caused him all those years ago when he forged the Sword and placed it in the hands of Jerle Shannara."

Allanon's expression hardened, but still the knowledge served as a balm to his heart. He might have destroyed the world's last hope, but he had not killed an innocent man. "But if you knew it was a trap, why didn't you warn me? I could have helped you protect Collice."

Derrivanian was already shaking his head once again. "You couldn't have helped. No one could. And warning you wasn't possible. If I had told you anything other than what I did, Collice would be dead. The Skull Bearer was in the back room with her when you were out here talking with me."

Derrivanian's face was haggard, and his eyes were filled with despair. "Don't you see? I had to choose between you and Collice. I had already lost everything else that mattered in my life. I was not about to lose her, as well."

He leaned forward, the fingers of his hands knotted together. "The Skull Bearer cautioned against saying anything that would warn you. If Weir did not die by your hand, if anything happened to change that outcome, if you learned it was a trap–even by accident–it promised it would return for Collice."

"But you believed I might survive anyway?"

The old man could hardly bear to look at the Druid. "I hoped as much. Judge me as you wish. I deserve it. It was a roll of the dice with lives at stake. I knew the risks. I simply took the choice that seemed best at the time. I wagered your life against Collice's."

Allanon looked away. "You should know that the Skull Bearer still lives. I was too weakened from the struggle to destroy it."

Derrivanian shrugged. "It doesn't matter. It will gain nothing by killing me now. It's too late. I tricked it."

The Druid's eyes locked on him. "How did you do that?"

The old man had a strange look on his face. "It was surprisingly easy. I knew that no matter what happened, it would return for me eventually. It never intended to keep its word. Once I had done what it wanted and tricked you into going after Weir, it would have no further use for me. It would wait for a time, then it would come back to finish me."

He paused. "If I were in its place, I would do the same. But it waited too long. It made a mistake. It should have started by making very certain that Weir was indeed the last of the Shannara instead of

wasting time playing games with you."

Allanon stared. "What are you saying?"

"When I told you that Weir was the last of the Shannara kin, I lied. There is another. Weir was not the last."

"Another heir? Are you lying this time, too?"

The old man shook his head. "It was necessary to tell you that Weir was the last. The Skull Bearer was listening. I was betraying you, but I was also using the betrayal to reinforce what the Skull Bearer wrongly believed. If you lived, I told myself, I would give the name to you. If you died, there was probably no hope for any of us. In any case, I would not allow my knowledge to fall into the wrong hands."

Allanon could hardly believe what he was hearing. "So you're sure? There really is another? Weir was not the last?"

Derrivanian shifted his gaze, first to the door, then to the windows, as if to reassure himself that no one else was listening. "There was a boy who was orphaned as a child, a boy whose father was an Elf and whose mother came west from the Borderlands."

He paused. "The boy approaches manhood now, but he is not yet fully grown. His parents were good people, intelligent and responsible, the right sorts. It may be so with this boy."

"His name?"

"Aren Shea."

Allanon shook his head in rebuke, his dark face intense. "I recognize the name. But a fever took him while he was still very small, shortly after his parents died. That was years ago."

"Yes. Tragic. He was the last of his line. The burial service was poorly attended since there were no longer any living relatives among the Elves. He was buried and forgotten. Even by you, it seems. Though you can visit his gravesite in Arborlon, if you wish."

The Druid paused. "Are you saying he didn't die?"

"Exactly–though I arranged for the circumstances surrounding his death to look as convincing as possible."

"Because you knew. Even then. You knew he would be hunted."

"His parents were killed under mysterious circumstances. Just before this happened, his mother brought the child to Collice and asked her to take him. She sensed the danger, I think. The women were close friends, and the boy's mother knew my wife could be trusted. She asked Collice to keep him until she was certain the danger was past, then she would take him back. But if anything happened to the parents, we were to fake the boy's death, then convey him to her brother's home in the Borderlands and tell no one what we had done. We were to hide the truth from everyone so that her son might have a chance to live."

"So you did as she asked? And the Warlock Lord and his Skull

Bearers have not discovered the truth?"

"They have no reason to suspect the boy still lives. No one in the whole of the Westland knows the truth."

"You are certain of this?"

"As certain as I can be. You will have to determine if I am right or not for yourself. The boy's name is different now. He is called Shea Ohmsford. He was given his uncle's surname. He resides in the village of Shady Vale in the forests south of the Border Cities."

Derrivanian gave a weak smile and a shrug. "I have done what I promised myself I would do if you returned. It is the only thing I can offer as recompense for my behavior. I hope you can understand." Then he gestured toward the door. "You should go now. Find the boy. Save him."

Allanon rose. "You should take you own advice, then. Leave here immediately. Take your wife to Arborlon and ask the King for protection."

The old man shook his head. "I sent her away to stay with friends the moment the Skull Bearer left to follow you. I asked them to hide her until they heard from me. I don't know where she is."

"Then join her. Do so before the Skull Bearer comes for you."

The other man smiled, but there was no warmth. "No, it's too late for that. It was always too late." He took the glass of ale he had brought for himself and drained it. His eyes fixed on Allanon. "Do you really think we would be safe from the Warlock Lord and his Skull Bearers in Arborlon? Do you think we would be safe anywhere?"

"Eventine Elessedil is not his father. He harbors no bitterness toward you. He is dedicated and compassionate. He will do his best to protect you."

"I am the only one who can do what is necessary to protect Collice, and I have done it." He gestured toward the glass. "You see this? A permanent sleeping potion. The kind you hear about all the time. I am putting myself beyond the Warlock Lord's reach. I know myself. I am weak, and if pressure were brought to bear, I would give up everything I know. But if I can't talk, I can't tell."

Allanon stared. "You took poison?"

"I have betrayed you once. I would do so again. I would betray everyone. But I could not bear to let such a thing happen." He shrugged. "I have lived my life doing the best I could. I would like to think I died in the same way." He was already slurring his words. "Maybe, if you have the time, you could tell Collice …"

Then his eyes fixed, his head fell back, and he was gone.

Allanon rose, lifted him out of the chair, and laid him on the mattress in the corner. He placed a blanket over the body. It was the best he could do in the time he had. He couldn't stay longer. He would

tell someone about Derrivanian on the way through town.

He stood for a moment, looking down at the body. The old man had ended things on his own terms. He was probably right about his wife. Once he was dead, the Skull Bearers would not bother hunting her. There was no longer a reason.

He went outside into the twilight, wondering if Eldra and Collice Derrivanian would have found sanctuary in Arborlon as he had advised, or if they were both better off now.

He was uncertain, but the choice had not been his to make.

Minutes later, he was riding east toward the Borderlands and the hamlet of Shady Vale.